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SUBJECT: FOOD SECURITY ISSUES IN MOPTI DISTRICT, MALI

1. Summary: In conjunction with official travel to attend FAO's African Regional Conference in Bamako (septel), Alternate Permanent Representative Willem Brakel, U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome, traveled to Mopti, Bandiagara and surroundings in Central Mali between January 31 and February 2 to meet WFP field staff and visit WFP-supported activities. WFP was seen to make effective use of food aid to alleviate malnutrition and foster community development activities in conjunction with various other partners in the area; the level of engagement by local NGOs in several projects visited was particularly encouraging. End summary.

2. Mr. Brakel's program was coordinated and facilitated by WFP Country Director Pablo Recalde, in consultation with USAID Mali. Their support and assistance is gratefully acknowledged. This trip report does not purport to be a rigorous analysis of food insecurity in parts of Mali, nor of the UN agencies' response thereto; and selection of sites visited was driven in large part by logistical and timing constraints, and no attempt at either random or representative sampling was made. These observations, rather, are meant to capture aspects of the situation that might provide perspective for those involved in policy discussions at the headquarters for the UN food and agricultural agencies in Rome and in donor capitals. USAID/Bamako, the U.S. Embassy, and WFP/Mali had the opportunity to comment on the draft report.

#### BACKGROUND

3. According to an overview compiled by WFP, Mali is classified as a least developed, low-income food-deficit country that ranked 165th out of 174 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index. Almost half of all children in Mali are estimated to suffer from chronic malnutrition. Literacy rates are extremely low, and in 1997-98 the school attendance rate was around 50%. On its web site WFP lists three current operations in Mali, two of which were to have been completed in 2005:

-- An Emergency Operation (EMOP) for Assistance to Populations Affected by the Desert Locust Outbreak and Drought, March - November 2005, resourced at \$11 million.

-- A Regional Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO), responding to the Cote d'Ivoire crisis and its impact in neighboring countries, January-December 2005, which includes \$1.7 million for Mali (out of total funding of \$35.3 million), mainly for preparedness and support for returnees and their host families.

-- A Development Operation, the Mali Country Program, 2003-2007, funded at \$19.5 million.

The USG has contributed \$682,500 (4.38%) to the EMOP and \$13.3 million (26.6%) to the PRRO.

#### LATEST ASSESSMENT FROM FEWSNET

4. As of 17 January 2006, the food supply situation in 2006 was anticipated to improve, reflecting a good cereal harvest in the country and across the region. Aggregate production had been estimated by a joint FAO/Government mission at 3.1 million tonnes, some 14 percent above the five years average. Output of millet, the most important cereal crop, was estimated to have increased by some 30 percent to 1.1 million tonnes. However, production would have been much higher if fertilizer use had not been reduced this year due to the high prices and limited availability. Like several other Sahelian countries, Mali faced a severe food crisis characterised by unusually high food prices in 2005. The crisis that was triggered by cereal and pasture shortages across the sub-region resulting in depletion of household assets including livestock and high level of indebtedness, particularly among pastoral and agro-pastoral groups. As of September, 2005, an estimated total of 600,000 people were in need of food assistance.

#### MOPTI

5. An introductory briefing was presented at WFP's Mopti

Office by the officer in charge, Amadi Diallo, and two colleagues. They spoke enthusiastically and passionately about their work. Issues that arose in their presentation and in conversations during subsequent visits to the warehouses at Severe and project sites further east included:

-- The role of food aid. WFP local staff said that food aid served as a powerful catalyst for community projects; food was more effective than disbursing cash. They pointed to the impact of school feeding programs in the region in raising enrolment, particularly of girls, and in galvanizing community action. They recognized the possibility of disincentives to local production of food, and therefore said they are careful to suspend food aid delivery during the several months of each year that locally produced food was readily available. The outbreak of desert locusts in the previous year had created a special need for food assistance.

-- In-kind versus local purchase. In general, WFP purchases the great majority of dry cereals (millet, maize, sorghum) for Mali in-country. WFP imports all the enriched flour, given that Malian production capacity is limited or too expensive, as well as oil and pulses. For cereals, the year 2005 was the exception, since local production failed and thus most of what WFP received was from imports.

-- Coordination among UN agencies/donors. The WFP Country Program (CP) document clearly mentions the need "to integrate CP activities with those of other UN agencies, so that food aid, which is not in itself an adequate condition for development, may be accompanied by additional resources that are essential for effective implementation of development activities." WFP Mopti staff said that they maintained good contacts with government agencies and other UN partners active in their district. They praised the recent work of IFAD in the Timbuktu area, but said that FAO did not seem much in evidence -- apparently due to lack of resources.

-- Relationship with NGO partners. WFP carries out all its activities in the Mopti region through NGO partners. At the subsequent site visits the closeness of that relationship was evident, as was the attempt to find synergies with other development activities. This may not be the case for all other agencies and NGOs in the region, however. It was explained, for example, that local government authorities had expressed concern that they did not always know what NGOs were up to, and have asked for more detailed and frequent reporting from these organizations.

-- Needs. WFP staff in Mopti indicated they were adequately supplied with vehicles and facilities to carry out their tasks. They mentioned, however, that access to some project sites via road was impossible during the wet season, and suggested that having a boat to provide access by water would be helpful.

-- Communication and information sharing. The local WFP staff said they were in regular contact with WFP Bamako, and they receive occasional visitors from WFP Rome. They would welcome and appreciate further opportunities to communicate and exchange information with WFP and other partners in the area, particularly those just across the border in adjacent countries. They thought that they had developed some successful approaches to community agriculture (e.g., construction of floodplain rice paddies, small dams, wells and stone windbreaks) that could usefully serve as examples for others working in the region.

#### BANDIAGARA

16. The visit to Bandiagara began with a meeting with representatives of a farmers' association called Molibemo. The group's name, translated from the Dogon language, means "let us be united for work." Created in 1985, one year after a major drought, Molibemo currently has 85 members and is active in about half of the 21 communities in the Cercle de Bandiagara. Its articulate and outspoken leaders explained that the organization's principal activities include a cereal bank, development of onion cultivation as a cash crop, promotion of other income-generating activities for women, microcredit, anti-erosion and reforestation. They are supported by a number of international NGOs, including Bread for the World and German Hunger Action.

17. Following a courtesy call on the local Prefect and Mayor, we visited a community irrigation dam at Diombololeye. This food-for-work project led by community leaders with the assistance of Molibemo, German Hunger Action and WFP, mobilized community action to restore a dam whose catchment basin had become silted in over time. While we were there, the villagers were out in force to excavate the site with rudimentary hand tools. (The water for crops is likewise hand-carried one bucket or calabash at a time up

to the small individual farm plots, although some communities are investing in pumps.)

18. At a different location we observed another food-for-work project: a dam in the very early stages of construction. This involved the backbreaking work of smashing bedrock with a sledgehammer and transporting the resulting boulders one by one to the dry streambed where they would form the core of the dam. The demonstration of energy and enthusiasm by community members at both dam projects was impressive, and elsewhere some visible patches of bright green in an otherwise parched landscape attested to the potential benefits of this approach to community farming. But these projects also provided vivid illustrations of challenges and past errors. The siltation seen at the first site pointed to a longstanding failure to address ongoing problems of soil erosion and deforestation in the small watershed. The building of the new dam, it was explained to us, had become necessary when a community's previous dam had failed. Later, we passed additional dams where there was no sign of cultivation; we were told that the residents had failed to close the sluices in time to capture the ephemeral rains of the previous wet season, thereby missing their opportunity to plant crops on this spot this year.

19. We also visited several targeted villages in the area of Koundialan, where WFP and its NGO partners were active in efforts to enable young children and expectant and nursing mothers to meet their special nutritional and nutrition-related health needs. There we were met by Yaiguere Fifi Tembeley, the energetic and dynamic head of the Yam Giribolo Tuno Association for the Promotion of Women. This group has been active since 1997 in seeking to empower and raise the incomes of rural women in its area of operation, the Dogon Plateau. Ongoing activities include flour milling, family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, microcredit, and artisanal soap-making and cloth dyeing.

#### COMMENT

10. The Mopti area, particularly the floodplain of the Niger River seems to hold considerable agricultural potential, but eking out a living on the rocky hillsides appears to be a struggle even without the vagaries of sparse rainfall and desert locust infestations. In this environment, WFP was seen to make effective use of food aid to alleviate malnutrition and foster community development activities in conjunction with various other partners. The challenges are formidable, but a bright spot for this visitor was the energy and passion with which local NGOs are tackling these problems at the community level.

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